

PROMISE MARKS PERFORMS SONGS OF ETTA JAMES IN ONE-WOMAN SHOW, "A SUNDAY KIND OF LOVE" AT THE BLACK REPERTORY THEATER IN BERKELEY

Posted on December 18, 2024 by OAKLAND POST



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Special to the Post

It was "A Sunday Kind of Love" at the Black Repertory Group Theater in Berkeley on Saturday night, Dec. 7. The one-woman musical based on the music of Etta James featured the multi-talented singer Promise Marks



Marks, who wrote and directed the musical, also owns PM Productions.

"The (show) is a fictional story about a character named Etta, aka Lady Peaches," said Marks. "She falls in love with Johnny Rhythm, leader of the Rhythm Players Band and headliners of Madam G's Glitta Lounge."

Marks channeled the essence of Etta James, singing favorites such as "Sugar on the Floor" and "At Last."

In between her soulful songs, Marks narrated impactful moments of the love story and journey of blues and forgiveness.

Marks sultry voice carried the audience back to an era that echoed with the power of Black music and a time of great change.

Marks said James shared love for the Black community by singing at gatherings during the Civil Rights Movement uplifting the people.

"She spoke to the movement, spoke to the people, and let her music speak for itself," Marks said.

Backing the musical's monologues, images and videos of Etta James are projected for the audience to view. While the production is fictional, Marks infused script with the unfairness and heartbreak James experienced while performing.

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Marks performed gospel artist Donnie McClurkin's "We Fall Down" as she narrated acts of reconciliation and forgiveness among the characters at Johnny Rhythm's deathbed.

Marks, who regularly sings for the Miss America Pageant, was asked to perform as Etta James last year. "(At the event) a lady yelled out to me: 'You're Etta James!' And then the audience went crazy. I said to myself, 'I may have something here,'" she said.

Within 12 months, Marks created the musical production, which featured a dozen songs honoring "the great legacy of Etta James," she said.

Marks says she was saddened to see how Etta James was often judged by the struggles in her life and wanted to offer attendees a more layered view.

"Etta's life was so big. I want people to know that she was more than her drug addiction," said Marks. "We can't make that her legacy. Her catalog is too amazing. You can't just be that and have the catalog that she (created). I don't want the addiction to be the focus: I want her music, her element, her sassiness, and what she brought to be the focus – her woman-ness, that she was strong, and I wanted to honor that."

Set Designer Nora Burnette says she created the set segments to mirror James' life story. A set designer for BRG since 2016, she explained that her process of researching the scenario and the character serve as her inspiration for her design.

"I try to design a set as close to real life as possible so that the actress can deliver the performance sincerely," said Burnette. "By creating the right setting, it helps the actors release the true essence of a character."

The set brought the story to life and absolutely floored Marks. "Once Promise (Marks) saw the actual set, she understood my vision: 'Wow, you get me. You get it,'" Marks told the designer.

Born Jamesetta Hawkins, Etta James, began her career in 1954 and gained fame with hits such "At Last" and "I'd Rather Go Blind." She faced a number of personal problems, before making a musical comeback in the late 1980s with the album "Seven Year Itch."

Co-producer and BRG Development Director, Sean Vaughn Scott, works with Overseer Production. According to producer Pamela Spikes, "Marks talent truly does Etta's life story justice."

Pam Jacobs of Hercules, a friend of Marks' mom, Jackie Smith, said, Marks "was fabulous and sang all of those songs flawlessly."

"I'm so proud of my daughter," said Smith.

Marks, who has served as an instructor for BRG, will return on Feb. 21- 23 for an encore run of the musical.

"It's an honor to be a part of the BRG (Black Repertory Group) family and continue our executive director Dr. Mona Vaughn Scott's vision for the Black Repertory Group theater," said Marks.

The Black Repertory Group Theatre is located at 3201 Adeline St., Berkeley, CA 94703. For information, visit: BlackRepertoryGroup.com



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